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# Gaining insights into young people's playful wellbeing in woodland through art-based action research

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**Abstract:** As part of the Good from Woods research project exploring the wellbeing outcomes of time spent in woodland-based activity, an artist-practitioner undertook research for over 18 months to explore the benefits of outdoor play. Using techniques that encouraged young people playing outdoors to collaborate in the research, data generation took place within a managed woodland adventure play area in a neighbourhood challenged by multiple deprivation. This article explores how arts practice as action research can help to capture and represent how young people aged 7 to 15 feel about themselves and their free play. The research methodology was able to encompass playwork practitioners' principles for child-led activity and perspectives that understand play as an art form. However, tensions can be found in the use of such an approach and generation of analysis and findings comparable to investigative frameworks used in other wellbeing research.

**Key words:** playwork research, artist as researcher, arts practice, adventure playground, practitioner research, nature play, wellbeing

## Introduction

This article explores an aesthetic, social and ecological journey through methods of researching the benefits of playing outdoors in woodland. It considers how researching play as an 'artist' might have impact on the nature of 'findings', particularly if play, as an evolutionary cultural behaviour, is regarded as an art form in itself. It reflects on whether this artist-researcher (a-r) methodology may contribute to reaching young people<sup>4</sup> effectively, while increasing the breadth and potentially the validity of the data collected. Tensions are highlighted between achieving such aims and the generation of findings comparable with those of other approaches to investigating wellbeing.

## Defining the research role: researching young people and play

When researching play and young people's lives, there are fundamental questions to be asked about the researcher's role and methods, such as issues of age, validity, disciplinary perspective and power relations (Christensen, 2004). Should the researcher, for example, be an academic or practitioner, scientist or storyteller, observer, collaborator or activist? Is it possible to adopt a practice that might help bridge some of these seeming divides?

When I was eleven years old my teacher asked: "Are you an artist or a scientist?" The choice for me has always been difficult, why do I have to choose, aren't I both? I ended up nominally "playing" with art and "working" with science. My life ... spans both sides of the fence. (a-r reflection, August 2013)

The cultural assumptions and ideals guiding our understanding of the activity of research can create barriers to the confident use of creative, collaborative, flexible, immersive and playful research approaches that may be particularly appropriate to the exploration of play. Historically, such barriers have arguably been particularly prevalent in the field of research with young people (Morrow and Richards, 1996).

In the instance of the case study discussed within this article, stakeholders, including playwork practitioners, were keen to explore the impact of increased nature-inspired play sessions on young people's relationship to a wooded playground. While some evaluation was taking place, stakeholders were enthusiastic to identify a

strategy for carrying out more in-depth research on any effects. Key questions in pursuing this plan arose, however, particularly around adult–child power relations on site. The need to evaluate the scheme was clearly an adult agenda, although its results might be used as advocacy on behalf of young people’s views. Instigation of a peer-led process was an aspiration, with young people determining the shape of the enquiry and capturing the opinions of their age group, but stakeholders felt that the focus and parameters of peer-led research should ideally be determined by young people themselves, and not be imposed. Questions arose over whether an adult researcher employed to collect data could ever enter and understand young people’s play worlds. Playwork practitioners were also concerned that any research process engaging young people might actually impinge on their preferred activities and play

Following such consideration, the a-r was engaged both to support opportunities for peer-led research design and data collection at Fort Apache (through collaboration with an established group of young peer researchers, including users of the site), and to create and manage a participative methodology that could take forward acknowledged adult research aims and priorities. Peer researchers helped the a-r pinpoint ways of collecting data they felt appropriate to young people playing and the aims of the research, but chose to focus their own research on investigating play priorities across the area. This cemented the a-r’s focus on achieving young people’s aware, engaged and influential collaboration within the adult-led research process.

The resulting methodology, explored below, generated high levels of respondent participation among Fort Apache’s young users. Its wide scope and long timescale allowed participants to become involved according to their interests and preferences. While the degree of involvement varied, the a-r felt confident that every young person regularly playing at Fort Apache had freely participated to some extent. Playwork practitioners and the a-r were conscious that some respondents might be hard to reach or difficult to engage, due to the nature or demands of their circumstances. However, it appeared that a playful methodology sometimes facilitated involvement of respondents self-reporting difficult life situations, perhaps because play provided a respite from such contexts and a source of wellbeing. Yet, while the methodology seems to have encouraged inclusiveness, conveying this broad range of voices is perhaps challenged by tensions between the use of playful methods and the production of findings easily communicable beyond the local level.

**PHOTOGRAPH 1** DIAGRAM OF YOUNG RESEARCHERS’ IDEAS FOR RESEARCH METHODS TO USE IN THE WOODS BY THE A-R



Source: Wright (2013)

## Shifting the researcher/researched boundaries

The issues of concern in this case closely reflect debates within the literature around research with young people taking place at the turn of this century. During this period the social sciences increased their focus on exploring the impacts of age-based relativism on young people’s lives. In methodological terms, this growing concern influenced questions concerning the kinds of interaction the researcher could or should have with young research participants (James and Prout, 1997).

The simultaneous proximity and remoteness of youth from adulthood was central within these debates. As Fine and Sandstrom (1988, p 9) observe, ‘Few groups in our culture are as close and as distant as are our young

people.’ Establishing this distance is often fundamental to adult interpretations of what it is to be young, and can define understandings of young people’s ‘culture’, aspirations, intellectual capacities and need of protection. In turn, understanding how to navigate such distances has often been seen as crucial to the researchers’ role (Christensen, 2004).

During the later 20th century, Western culture has perhaps most frequently interpreted this gap in terms of a journey through generic psychological developmental stages, with young people gaining increases in capacity along the way (Cohen, 1983; Hill and Tisdall, 1997; Valentine, 1997; Grave and Walsh, 1998). Within research focused on young people, this tradition favoured quantitative measurements of the journey between child and adult states. However, such approaches came under a sustained, interdisciplinary critique for failing to acknowledge the socio-cultural assumptions about ‘childhood’ that influence researchers, their practice and interpretations (Grave and Walsh, 1998, p 3; see also Jenks, 1996; Valentine, 1997).

Such criticism formed part of a reassessment of the nature of childhood in policy (critically in the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) and practice, where young people’s lives were increasingly understood as possessing intrinsic worth and validity, rather than merely being staging posts on the way to adulthood. Within the new paradigm, youth-focused research and practice increasingly understood young people to be the experts on being young (Fraser et al, 2004, p 16). As a guide to appropriate research approaches, it established young lives as independently significant areas for research, and recognised both young people’s agency in shaping their worlds, as well as their ability to explain and explore that world themselves (Christensen and Prout, 2005, p 42).

Where once young people might have been understood as potentially difficult research subjects, lacking comprehension of research tasks or etiquette (Nespor, 1998, p 371), now the challenge was to identify how adult-set research agendas could adequately make contact with or represent young lives. These concerns frequently centred on power relationships, ethics and how to establish a working relationship with young people. Young people-focused research underwent a re-conceptualisation as a joint or increasingly participative enterprise (Lynch, 1977; Moore, 1986; Mauthner, 1997; Mahon et al, 1998; Nespor, 1998). In turn, there was a greater engagement with questions of how to achieve informed consent and embrace methodologies that responded to a young person’s context (Mauthner, 1997, p 19).

While this shift in conception and methodological approach relatively quickly became mainstream (Hill, 1997; Christensen and Prout, 2005), authors were clear that it was not time to stop challenging our approach to research with young people: ‘this is no time to be self-congratulatory for while childhood studies might have come of age ... it is not yet fully matured. There is still much work to be done’ (James, 2007, p 1). For example, researchers cautioned that research with young people must not be conducted in a silo and be accessible to the agencies that shape young people’s lives (Matthews, 2003; Horton and Kraftl, 2005; Spencer, 2005). In addition, some warned of the risk of over-relying on frameworks and approaches that might limit new thinking so that they become ‘exclusionary practices ... anything that does not fit these boundaries and norms ... simply not the “done thing”’ (Horton and Kraftl, 2005, p 139). Such commentary calls for frequent refreshing of theoretical and methodological approaches to gaining understanding of young people’s lived experience. The Good from Woods project responded to that call.

## Context of the research

### Good from Woods project and practitioner research on wellbeing

The questions and experiences explored in this article are drawn from a case study conducted as part of the Good from Woods (GfW) project, established in 2010 to help understand the wellbeing benefits of woodland-based activity and to engage practitioners in undertaking that investigation. GfW, funded by the Big Lottery Research Programme, has sought to increase the capacity of the third sector to undertake its own research. Discussions and consultation with groups involved in delivering woodland activities revealed a need and appetite for more robust research evidence on the nature of these impacts.

Over its lifetime, GfW has financially supported and mentored woodland activity providers to carry out case study research of practice in their setting to understand what kinds of wellbeing participants might achieve

and how. The idea of wellbeing has provided a unifying focus for these practitioners in considering and assessing how spending time in woods may influence people's health and happiness. GfW practitioner-researchers have joined the project from a variety of settings, working cultures and educational backgrounds. GfW collaborated with practitioners in creating a common understanding and framework of the component aspects of 'wellbeing'. This model incorporated indicative experiences and behaviours that were likely to have been affected by woodland-based activity, based on literature and the findings of previous GfW studies (Good from Woods, 2015).

Providing examples and definitions, such as 'feeling confident ... capable ... purposeful' or 'socially supported and supportive of others' for each of the aspects, it guided where practitioners might look for evidence of changes to, or improvements in, people's wellbeing. It suggested that people might gain satisfaction in any one of five aspects of experience – psychological, physical, social, emotional and biophilic (connection to nature) – and so influence their sense of wellbeing. Each practitioner-researcher was encouraged to engage with the framework critically, exploring how well it worked for their own dataset, and where it might be expanded.

The particular practitioner researcher in this case study was an MA student artist, already a volunteer playwork practitioner on the site, with knowledge of nature play approaches. In order to develop appropriate, innovative research methods, the stakeholders were keen to engage a practitioner who was already confidently engaged with the social, cultural and physical environments of Fort Apache. GfW embraces the action research conventions that validate and endorse practice-based, embedded, context-specific methods and findings as a basis for change and improvement (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002, p 4). Experimentation with practice-derived research processes, where practitioners were free to iteratively establish methods congruent with the circumstances of the research (Waite et al, 2010; Power and Bennett, 2015), was firmly embedded within an ethical framework (reviewed and approved by a research ethics committee at Plymouth University).

### Case study setting: Fort Apache, Torquay

The research took place at Fort Apache Adventure Playground. Situated in Torquay, Fort Apache is one of three adventure playgrounds managed by Play Torbay. Play Torbay is a small dynamic, voluntary sector organisation championing young people's play across the area. It offers free play opportunities to organisations, parents and local people, and supports a group of young people aged 8-18 to take part in activities and help make decisions about what young people need in Torbay. At the time of research, the staff worked for Play Torbay or for Play England.

A publicly accessible wooded site, surrounded by housing estates and not much fencing, Fort Apache is available for play at all times. Play Torbay embrace this free play in which young people come and go as they please and make no payment. There are regularly 50+ young people playing when playwork practitioners are present.

Staffed play sessions are offered two to three times per week, with more during school holidays. Young people lead nature play throughout the woods, and are encouraged to expand it with tools, equipment (treehouses, nets, ropes and swings) and support (for fire lighting and cooking). Structured playwork practitioner-led activities include woodwork, modelling clay, video making, seasonal themed sessions and tree planting. Some of these activities were offered as part of the Exploring Nature Play programme that aimed to create opportunities for play inspired by nature (funded via Play England through the Big Lottery Fund), and whose impact was being assessed as part of the remit of the research.

## Research methodologies

The a-r's research methodologies can be broadly categorised as:

- Playing with conversational drift – open-ended learning and dialogical aesthetics.
- Intervention for play – activities, found objects and play opportunities.
- Envisioning playing outdoors – reflections on free and indeterminate play.

These experimental research techniques and art forms merged into each other and created a collaborative and context responsive practice. This methodology was underpinned by values the a-r understood as central to her artistic practice (the importance of being reflective, collaborative, improvisational, receptive, responsive and crossing boundaries between work and play, art and science), which corresponded with the ethical ethos of Fort Apache.

The methodology was underpinned by observation and reflection. Non-participant observational sketches and notes on young people's interaction with place were made on a recurrent basis, creating a space for refreshing awareness and checking developing thinking. These observations were recorded in a journal/sketchbook, with some descriptive text, but mainly in pictures. These were then developed within the 'maps' described below

Participant observations were made informally in field notes and sketches, helping to capture data when the a-r was invited to collaborate in young people's play. They included observations of the play, the affective and physical setting in which it took place, and reflective notes on the a-r's experience. This observational evidence gathering was improvised in response to opportunity, although the researcher was careful to confirm young people's verbal consent for its inclusion within the research (participants had the research explained at the beginning of their involvement and had completed ethics consent forms). The gaining of informed consent, assent or dissent from young respondents is a complex issue (Morrow and Richards, 1996; Christensen, 2004). Throughout the data collection process the a-r paid close attention to participants' wishes to engage with, collaborate in, or withdraw from the research (via monitoring of verbal and non-verbal interaction), and frequently reminded the children of the research context.

### Conversational drift, open-ended learning and dialogical aesthetics

'Conversational drift' is a term used by artists Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison (1992) to reflect a process of conversational interchange. It is initiated with an issue/problem/place/feeling, and then allowed to go wherever it leads. The artist provides a 'space' (sometimes literally) and is prepared to talk about anything. In the case of Fort Apache, the starting point was the place: the woodland.

The people around me know that I'm being a researcher, and I'm also a volunteer play worker, they are familiar with me. So they find me and start asking questions, or suggest a walk, or ask me to help them set up a swing or build a den. From that point the conversation drifts, ebbs and flows. Between us we are shaping a joint response to the place and our feelings about the place. (a-r field notes, December 2012)

In order for conversational drift to work well as a research technique, it was important that the a-r's identity and role was strongly understood by colleagues and the young people at the site. The a-r was, on the one hand, known as a volunteer playwork practitioner, and therefore could be easily approached by fellow volunteers, staff and young people for practical help and social interaction. On the other hand, it was also important that her status as a 'researcher' was clearly understood, and that this was not simply a chat. From an ethical standpoint, participants in the research needed to be aware that the information they provided within such conversations would be recorded, interpreted and reported within the research. At the start of the activity, the a-r orally reminded the participants of the research context. The a-r also checked that she could use the conversation as data at the 'end', as sometimes the conversational drift may have gone so far that the participant may have forgotten the process was taking place.

Establishing this insider/outsider role and young people's comfort with it took time and frequent presence at Fort Apache:

The young people know who I am, they have given me permission to talk and I wait for their lead. I discover more if I am invited in, they tell me what's going on with their lives, and with the woods – interplay between them and the woods. They take me for a walk; show me their dens, their trees, their treasures. We get muddy, wet and cold together, sharing the same experience. The conversations I have as I walk with them are open-ended; I have to give it time. As an artist I have this luxury of time and freedom, and as I walk I contemplate that I, too, am playing. (a-r field notes, December 2012, and annotated reflections, August 2013)

This method responded to the children's conversational or practical agenda, and attempted to respect their need for resolution of these agendas over the researcher's aims. The 'solution' to be reached, or 'resolution', was to be determined by the participant. The den was built, the walk was finished, the conversation ceased as lunch became the participant's new goal.

Respect for the participants' perceived conversational and practical goals was also used as a way for the a-r to try and address issues of researcher objectivity and bias during these exchanges. The free format of conversational drift perhaps results in more questions from the participant about the a-r's opinions and ideas. At Fort Apache, the a-r responded to these, and recognised these instances as less neutral moments of exchange, more a collaboration in constructing data. However, the intention was to offer ideas in response to the participant's conversational goals and to pay attention to their impact. The a-r felt this responsiveness was important in creating a natural and transparent data generation technique with young people that did not interrupt or impose on their practical or imaginative goals. However, a lack of researcher direction also admits the possibility that nothing will pop up in the conversation that supports the research focus. For these reasons, the a-r found the approach time-consuming, and used the method alongside stimuli for engagement through artful prompts, as discussed below. Theoretically, the timescales of conversational drift could span days, weeks, even years.

The a-r's agenda in facilitating such non-directional exchange was partly to gain access to information that participants might not express directly in words (Power and Bennett, 2015). This appeared particularly important in talking to young people, who might find it challenging to articulate their feelings, or who, in a play context, may be enjoying expressing themselves through actions rather than words. The a-r was conscious of a wide variety of less tangible aspects of the 'space' the conversation produced and occupied. From where certain kinds of conversation took place, for instance, to what the young people did, how they did it and the physical marks and impressions this activity left behind. The a-r also aimed to be aware of the mood created by young people sharing their activity and words. This approach very consciously attempted to engage with the many ways we might perceive the world beyond seeing or hearing. 'New organs of perception' is a concept stemming from the scientific work of Goethe (Seamon and Zajonc, 1998), which refers to a participatory, holistic mode of seeing. The a-r similarly tried to engage with the senses beyond ears, eyes and nose: to marry these also with the feelings and moods that emerged within the research process such as empathy, trust and the convergence of researcher and respondents' ideas.

The art in these conversations reveal information between the words, in the silences, in the walking, in where we go. It creates a sort of social sculptural form (Sacks, 2015) that spreads through the woods and echoes the play. The art in this play is not a social science; it is describing our thought connections. Sometimes I visualised these spaces and thoughts in the prints that I made for further conversations. I'll never know whether my conversations with them have helped them look at their woods differently long term, but perhaps the showing and sharing strengthens a thought for a future time among the trees. (a-r reflection, August 2013)

This quote above is indicative of the ways in which the research agenda was intertwined with a-r's purpose in pursuing her art: that the connection between people and environment can be grown via artistic intervention. It also recognises that the research process with young people is never neutral, and that its conduct results in impacts for both the researcher and the researched (Christensen, 2004). By understanding the interaction between researcher and participant as the shared creation of a 'social sculpture', the a-r acknowledges her role and motives in this process and the social space taken up not just by the words, but also by the moods and feelings exchanged – interactions that might give clues to young people's use of and relationship with the site.

The a-r also took inspiration from the work of artist Francis Alÿs who works in every kind of medium, from painting to sculpture, performance to film, with what he describes as the aim of distilling experience to strengthen the conversation: 'I am more interested in the attempt of articulation than the actual enunciation' (Alÿs, cited by Deuze, 2009, pp 1-6). The a-r felt that the work of revisiting, representing and reflecting on the entire shape of the interaction with participants was an important way of developing the conversation and clarifying respondents' views. This process is explored further below

During conversational drift, young people described and enacted being in control of their space, in dens, treehouses and equipment, or while hiding in vegetation. They sometimes seemed to utilise such moments as

an escape from the domestic contexts of family and home, and enjoyed opportunities to be relatively solitary and quiet, and to establish a controlled environment:

‘My mum and dad don’t live together anymore.... It’s good here.... It makes me feel peaceful when I lie down on the handkerchiefs [hammocks] and look up at the sky, the trees.’ (CX)

‘I come here to calm down.... Because I can get really angry. I can get really angry really easily. And it’s not very nice.’ (C10)

‘There’s like no particular place really, it’s just like every part of it is special ‘cos like when kids come here.... They literally feel welcomed, they literally feel like they can, they wake up in the morning and have a smile on their face and say yeah I’m going to Fort Apache I can do anything I want, no one can stop me.’ (C4)

The a-r collected evidence of young people feeling good through creative and imaginative interactions with Fort Apache’s social and physical environment: stories, daydreams, adventures, memories and atmospheres:

C6: ‘I daydream of creatures that are my friends....

a-r: ‘So what’s he [log creature] doing now?’

C6: ‘He’s doing a bit of sleep talking and it’s a log and there was sleep talking and you don’t want to disturb his natural behaviour.... He is a log baby, a little baby.’

a-r: ‘Who’s your [imaginary] friend? He’s just talking to [describing to audio recorder] – down the tunnel – what does he do, this friend?’

C10: ‘He kind of looks after my base at night and he does a very good job.’

## Intervention for play – activities, found objects and play opportunities

In order to research play, the a-r thought it appropriate to present new play – and conversational – opportunities.

### Found objects and random happenings – spatial and emotional aesthetics

Objects from the old tip pop out of the surface of the woods where I play. I found a carved angel wind chime and placed it on a post, displaying it as though it had rested there overnight. Discovered like magic the next day, the playwork practitioners told me it created new stories, adding a spark for imagination and questions about where it had come from, what the tip was about, what else might be living underneath the surface. (a-r reflection, August 2013)

I initiated a ‘tea party’ installation in a treehouse. Curtains and clothes adorned the graffiti covered wooden walls and posts. This type of play had never happened in these woods before, and it lasted for weeks afterwards. (a-r field notes, May 2012)

These methods were inspired by the young people’s searching for, and collecting, interesting finds on what had formerly been a rubbish dump. All of the activities were purely playful and experimental, but hoped to inspire collaboration and conversation. Whether it was one object or an installation, the offer was accepted and moved, altered, rebuilt. Comments from playwork practitioners and other stakeholders, alongside the new conversations they initiated with young people, emphasised the strength of young respondents’ enjoyment in having spaces and objects to shape and manage themselves.

The installation inspired boys to dress up, the creation of a ‘bedroom’ in another treehouse, and an invitation from the young people to ‘tea’. Following completion of the research, young participants remembered the experience and referred to it over a year later. As a research technique, such interventions embraced the idea that play is frequently done without a purpose beyond its own pursuit (Smith, 2012, p 11). Games were initiated between the a-r and young people for fun. However, promoting imaginative play through response to



found objects and the recreation of domestic experiences among trees and treehouses arguably increased the a-r's status as a 'player' – someone interested in play at Fort Apache, an initiator of diversions with the woodland setting, and a committed participant in the playful conversations being established.

It is art but seems closer to life.... I play games; if I called them sermons then nobody would play. Not even I. (Kaprow, 1966, pp 21-3)

The artist Allan Kaprow played social games and was the inventor of the 'Happening', which he defined as 'A game, an adventure, a number of activities engaged in by participants for the sake of playing' (quoted in Meyer-Hermann et al, 2008, p 68). This work aimed to remove divisions between life, art, artist and audience, its boundaries moving all the time. Sometimes art, sometimes life, sometimes more social science, but always play:

Both my interventions, "play as art as 'happenings' as life" displayed the environment in a new light according to the young people and playwork practitioners. Play Interventions as art in the woods work best if they are about having fun, taking the world lightly, few barriers and boundaries in place. The freedom thus created in the time and space in the atmosphere of the place generates new unknown journeys and transformations in play and thought which feed into the research. (a-r reflection, August 2013)

#### Human-made maps – researching the benefits of play in the woods through jointly creating a vision of Fort Apache

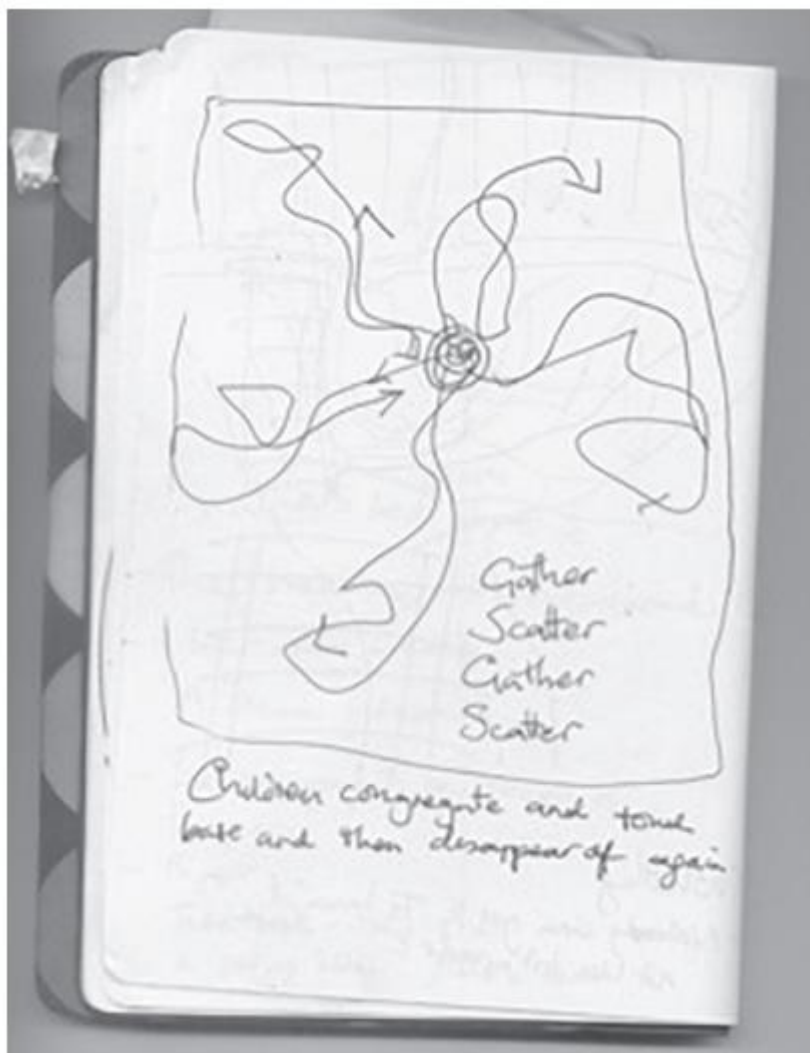
I have been presenting large map prints and blank pieces of paper to draw on. The young people come and go, come and stay, and as we draw with a stick from the wood floor we create an image that speaks with our voices. Their concentration is limited, but a fleeting line drawn between climbing one tree and eating a hot dog cooked on the fire feels like a gift. My play, my performative art is presenting a vision then letting go, removing myself and seeing whether an alternative truth is revealed. It is participatory and collaborative. The final images produce a reflection of the process, making the invisible play visible and they express a connection with the place. (a-r reflection, August 2013)

'If Fort Apache wasn't a little bit dangerous it wouldn't be that fun.... Because there's some mountains and they're dangerous but they're really fun to climb up.' (C13, young player drawing on a map at Fort Apache)

The a-r worked to interpret the spaces (social and physical) of Fort Apache as they observed them, and to characterise them in visual 'maps'. These were not objective measurements or diagrams of environment or activity, but aimed also at representing the less tangible aspects of places (moods and atmospheres, for example). The a-r took these maps to play sessions for young respondents to discuss and add to, annotating the prints with their play preferences and feelings, written and drawn. To the a-r this felt an important opportunity to offer up her developing interpretations of the place in a format that could be reshaped by young people through talking, making and doing. The communication it supported may have benefited the inclusion of non-verbal experiences and views and the perspectives of less vocally articulate respondents. Intended as another opportunity to strengthen the conversation, such mapping exercises may have also helped make clear to young people the interpretive role of the a-r and to respond to it.

Where children go, their desire lines, their behaviour on top of my emotional map of Fort Apache. (a-r reflection, August 2013)

PHOTOGRAPH 2 OBSERVATIONAL DIAGRAM OF THE CHILDREN COMING AND GOING



Source: Wright (2013)

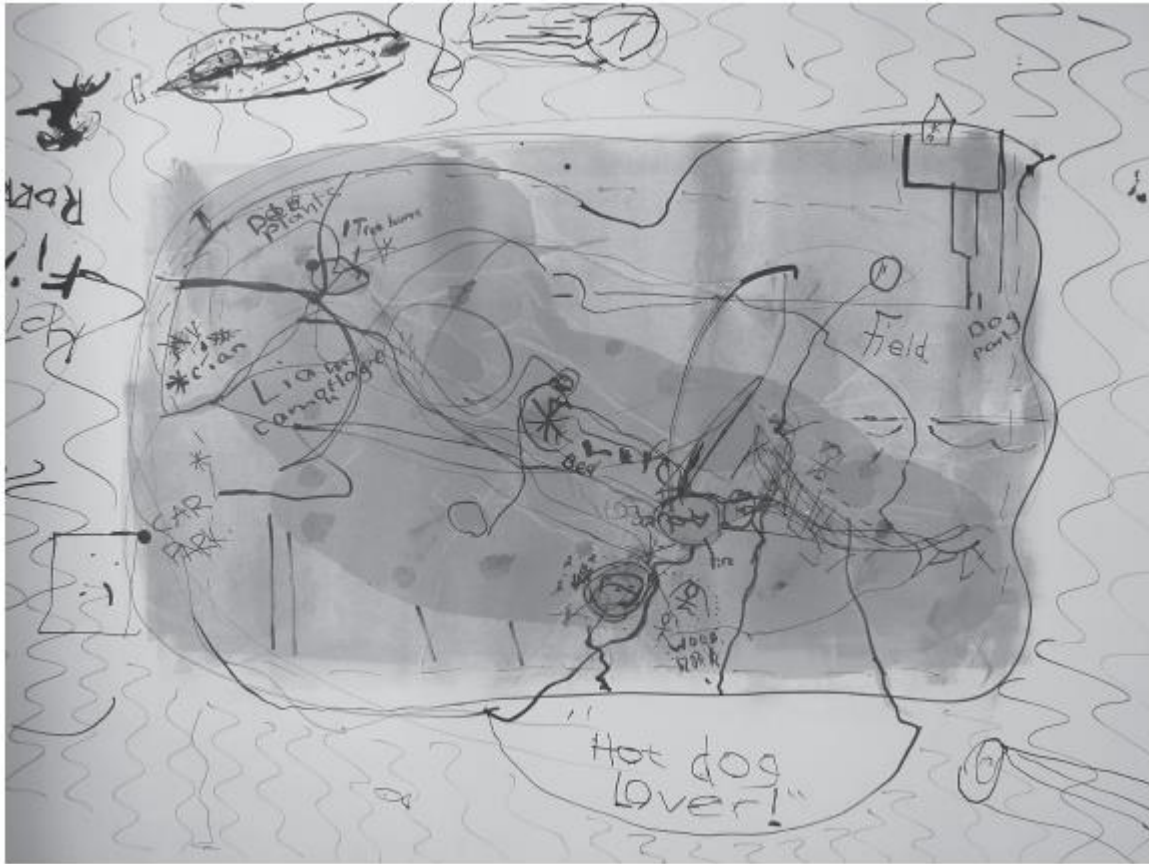
### 'Scientific' experiments – an artist ignoring the 'rules'

For instance I allude to science, by carrying out "experiments" but know I'm breaking scientific rules in order to try and initiate new or different thinking. (a-r reflection, August 2013)

As part of the research, the a-r worked with others to record where young people go in the wood using an accelerometer and GPS. This research took place using two self-selected volunteers (aged 10) on two days. The results are far from scientific, with the focus of the exercise concentrated more on participants' enjoyment of the measuring devices and collaboration in the research. However, the a-r embraced an opportunity to play with a 'scientific' tool, partly in the awareness that the type of data it might generate (visual, quantified, digitised) might prove more attractive to particular audiences. There are pressures from various contexts for 'objective', generalisable research, not least in the field of health, wellbeing and the natural world (Nieuwenhuijsen et al, 2014). It is important to recognise the potential influence of such cultural forces on practitioners' viewpoints and comfort in adopting a research role and tools (Goodenough and Waite, 2012).

I want to play with an unusual intervention, one that might hold attention of policy makers or playwork practitioners. Across the country there are scientists researching the health benefits of being active outdoors, for example, to and from school. On two days I asked two young people to wear some scientific kit (a GPS and activometer) while they played in the woods. One of these tools measures place and the other speed of travel and heart rate. They were happy to participate. I was playing too, not viable in a scientific sense, this research was undergone with artistic intent. I'm

PHOTOGRAPH 3 OUR MAP OF PLAY AT FORT APACHE



Source: Wright (2013)

playing with science. I am interested whether this type of play initiates more interest. (a-r reflection, August 2013)

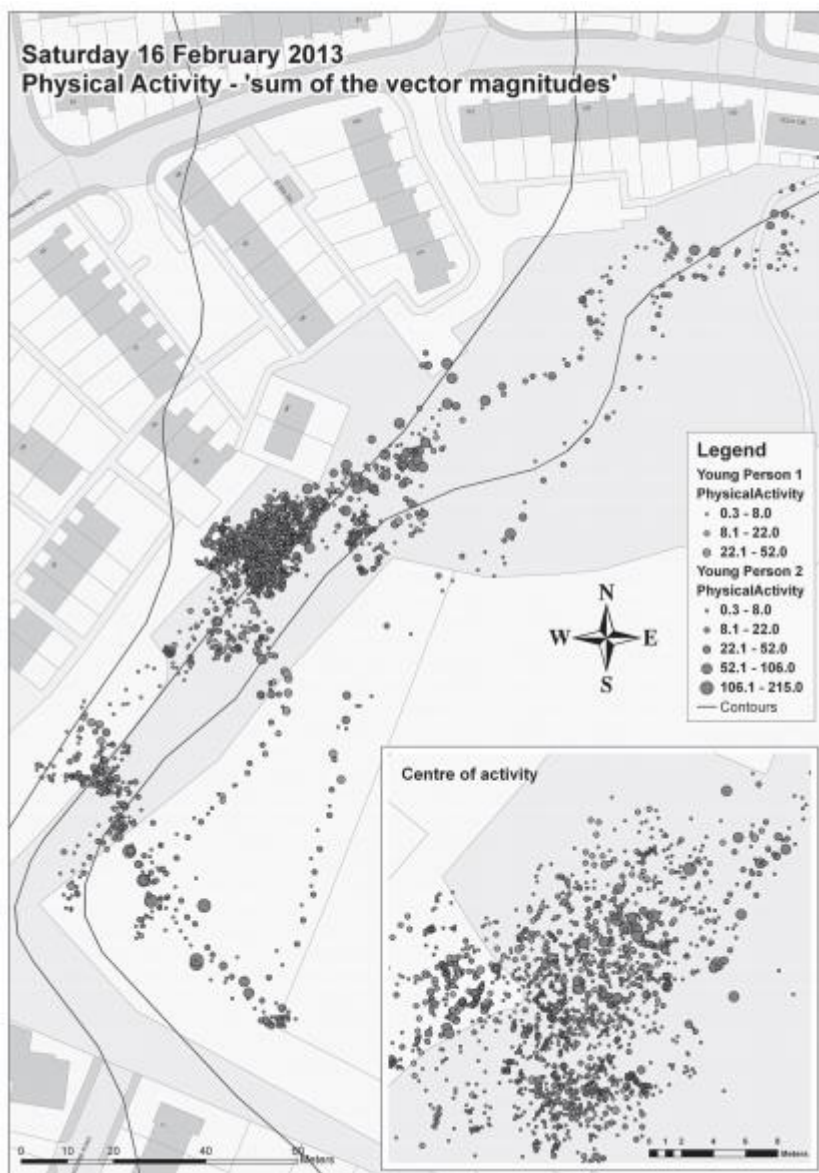
As an experiment it aimed at expanding the range of senses with which the research gathered data on play activity: attempting to give a voice to how the body experiences Fort Apache. This novel way of comprehending the use of the play areas provided the researcher, young people, playwork practitioners and the local community with another layer of understanding of how play takes place, and a fresh prompt in the ongoing conversation. The data was shared with young people so that they could validate and elaborate on the data collected, and then shared with older users and neighbours of the site at a community exhibition.

Young people responded to the machine-made maps, played with the data, and added their own take on it. This 'giving over' of an adult-initiated research tool for interpretation by young users felt like an important part of ensuring that this was a collaborative conversation and building of understanding. The researcher gained a deepening record of their regard and relationship with different play places, young people annotating and expanding on an unfamiliar way of viewing and valuing their activity.

### Envisioning playing outdoors – reflections on free and indeterminate play

The above methodologies aimed at collaborative 'envisioning' of play at Fort Apache, which the artist then re-presented as a second collection of prints. These images aimed to capture approaches to play, its patterns and randomness, and were created as 'conversation' pieces that could again be shared with young people and the wider community. A sample can be seen in the images below and were exhibited as part of a community exhibition at Fort Apache.

PHOTOGRAPH 4 MACHINE MAP OF PLAY



Source: Wright (2013)

### Community exhibition

A significant research 'happening' was a community exhibition about Fort Apache that included input from the young people, the a-r and the local community. Dens, found objects, maps and tea filled the hall.

During the exhibition photographs were projected onto the outside of the community centre. A child spontaneously sung an accompaniment. For the a-r this happening felt like the young people were able to ensure their views of Fort Apache were heard, with the community as a witness. The exhibition became an important part of attempting to address potential imbalances of power within the research relationships, where the power to amplify young voices might start and stop with the a-r or playwork practitioners at Fort Apache. Young people, staff, the a-r and the neighbouring community collaborated in setting it up, and post-intervention interviews with the stakeholders revealed how important the exhibition was for developing the wider community's understanding of Fort Apache and young people's activities there. The exhibition allowed the methodology and its outcomes to speak for themselves at the local level. It is important to note, however, that its art and artefacts were created with participants and stakeholders at a locally specific level. Unlike representations with more universal values or significance, they may not be easily translated to and understood in wider forums, or contrasted with other forms of measurement and expression.

PHOTOGRAPH 5 YOUNG PEOPLE'S RESPONSE TO THE MACHINE-MADE MAPS



Source: Wright (2013)

## The significance of play as art as research

Play, for me, defines almost any freely chosen activity that is exploratory and experiential. I was struck by the similarity between the way play and art are described in the same terms. So I decided to test out researching as art as play. (a-r reflection, August 2013)

Play and its philosophy are a vast subject area, including worldwide cultural differences, child development and play in adulthood. The discussion above described the perceived contrasts of adult and child worlds that influence approaches to researching young people's lives. Play, too, has been defined in terms of its distance and difference from other activities, particularly its perceived lack of purpose when compared with 'work'. John Dewey wrote: 'play is an activity not consciously performed for any sake beyond itself whereas work is an activity in which the interest lies in the outcome' (Smith, 2012, p 11, citing Dewey, 1909, p 217). While it is arguable that play may actually have a more 'abiding utility or deeper, more contingent objectives' (Erbele, 2014, p 216) than immediately obvious to the adult eye, the cultural understanding that play is divided from labour may also influence practitioner-researcher's understanding of the behaviours and actions that seem appropriate to the 'work' of researching play

On the other hand, the a-r was struck by the similarities in the way play and art have been understood and defined. For example, theories of play have explored its possible evolutionary roots (Gordon, 2007), and similarly artists have investigated the 'homo aestheticus', the idea that human societies have always displayed behaviours that can be called art, modes of behaviour that are biological and evolved (Dissanayake, 1992). Such ideas explore art and play as innate tendencies, associated with activities that are key to the human generation of culture. For Huizinga (1971, p 173):

Ritual grew up in sacred play; poetry was born in play and nourished on play; music and dancing were pure play.... We have to conclude, therefore, that civilization is, in its earliest phases, played. It does not come from play ... it arises in and as play, and never leaves it.

Sawyer (2003, p 4) reviews the way in which the connections between ludic activity and creativity have been understood historically. Such instances include the linking of both impulses to a divine spark and closeness to the notion of God within religious literature; a longstanding 'romantic' critique of formalised education as threatening both playful and imaginative drives in the child; and more recently, the emergence of psychological approaches to understanding the role of play within child development, and both its similarities with and possible links to, adult creative capacity (Sawyer, 2003).

In the 20th century psychologists such as Freud compared the qualities of adult creative endeavour with the process and outcomes of childhood play (Sawyer, 2003). Freud drew attention to the way in which both use imagination and invention to produce new 'designs' that aim to satisfy needs and desires (Sawyer, 2003). Other psychologists moved beyond comparison to suggest that childhood playfulness and its satisfaction are a significant precondition for establishing robust creative drive in adulthood (Sawyer, 2003). Vygotsky explored play as a primary developmental mechanism: the often collectively generated, abstract thinking it provokes stretching the child beyond independent perceptions and thoughts (Connery et al, 2010, p 11). In addition, Vygotsky identified play as the space where imagination first emerges, and via its abstract creation of 'new' things, beyond material realities, the start of a process that cements and extends creative abilities in young people (Connery et al, 2010). Sawyer (2003, p 4) argues that while the evidence for this association is sometimes ambiguous, it is nevertheless compelling.

Just as play and art can be recognised as sharing and nourishing a creative impulse, both are also frequently associated with freedom, autonomy and the ability to cross boundaries (Kaprow, 1966; Gordon, 2007, p 7; Play England, 2009). As the case study progressed and the complementary characteristics of play and art were further reinforced to the a-r, the freedoms and creativity of an arts-based practice to generate playful research techniques appeared validated.

As an artist-researcher/practitioner I was aiming for an open ended ... creative approach, where the time is less of an issue (as a volunteer), and experiential research was at the heart of it. Some ideas worked, others less well, but I knew that that was part of the learning process for all of us – young people and staff, I viewed it all as play ... in order to understand the benefits of play, I decided that my actions had to be play. In art terms, my play was my art. (a-r reflection, August 2013)

In addition, an artistic approach in its emphasis on openness, freedom and responsiveness to opportunity closely aligned with the ethos of playwork practitioners at the site:

'To me it [play] is all about the "Three Frees" for children; Free to choose what they want to do; Free to play when they want; and Free access – it doesn't cost anything and is equal to all.' (playwork practitioner, Fort Apache, 2013)

Notably, however, playwork practitioners at Fort Apache were sometimes surprised and gratified at the extent to which an artistic approach enabled a play-centred, collaborative research process:

'Your work [in the woods] has made us all think differently. As an artist you do bring a different quality to the team, which is very valuable. You have been on the edge, experimenting. What you could call an art installation became absorbed by the children, deconstructed and restructured as they wanted it in another treehouse! You have the permission to be more playful!' (playwork practitioner, Fort Apache, 2013)

As noted above, expectations of what 'research' constitutes, the types of research data that will be compelling, and how work is perceived to differ from play may all act as forces against the adoption of a playful, flexible and creative approach to research with young people. The a-r's creative practice-based research methodology arguably blurred the boundaries between research, play and playwork, creating the conditions necessary for each activity to flourish.



## End game – where play stops?

The evidence explored above suggests that a creative arts-focused approach to research can underpin a methodology that is both playful and ethical, equally valuing and voicing young people's perspectives. The hallmarks of this approach included expansive, experimental, sympathetic practice, responsive to and respectful of the research context.

The a-r at Fort Apache focused on building and strengthening an ongoing, collaborative conversation about play using correspondingly playful techniques. There was a strong interest in ensuring that verbal and non-verbal experiences were articulated, aimed at reducing barriers to respondents' participation, and ensuring the inclusion of multiple perspectives. Exploring and supporting young people's responses to, and involvement within, the research process was as essential as, and a key part of, attaining authoritative evidence.

However, as we have highlighted, tensions may exist in trying to incorporate some of the data and interpretation collaboratively generated, particularly that indicative perhaps of mood, emotion, atmosphere and imaginative engagement, into a wider evidence base for the benefits of woodland activity. These dilemmas may limit the ability of the researcher to 'enunciate' young people's views on wellbeing where they do not provide a customary and comparable set of results to other studies. The authors would welcome hearing of how practitioners and researchers working with similar approaches have worked with and resolved such issues.

### PHOTOGRAPH 6 ROUTES THROUGH FORT APACHE



Source: Wright (2013)

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<sup>2</sup> Alice Goodenough is a researcher for the Silvanus Trust, a charity working through partnerships to regenerate the woodlands in the southwest of England for economic, social and environmental benefits. Her research into people's engagement with woodlands and trees includes the social, cultural and environmental impacts of tree planting, woodlands as a context for behaviour change, and the wellbeing impacts of taking part in woodland-based activity. She is the lead author for this article.

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<sup>4</sup> The term 'young people' is used throughout this article to refer to children and teenagers from 0 to 18 years.



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